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SPIRITUALISING THE INTERNET

UNCOVERING DISCOURSES AND NARRATIVES OF RELIGIOUS INTERNET USAGE

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In 2001 the first international conference on religion and the Internet was held at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark. *Religious Encounters in Digital Networks* brought together researchers from around the world to discuss their studies of religion online. In the concluding session the conference organisers made a call for "more serious research" and reflection into emerging expressions religiosity and rituals online. Since then several texts have been published that took root at this conference.[1] This demonstrates the seriousness to which many scholars have taken this need for detailed investigation of religious engagement online. Still, however, much work remains at the level of documenting and defining the phenomenon of religion online. Little theoretical work exists that provides frameworks for explaining online religious activities in terms of larger social and cultural processes. A need exists for studies that not only define what happens when religion appears online, but also interpret why this is occurring and the implications for religious culture as a whole. This involves investigating questions such as what does a religious group's conception of the Internet influence how they negotiate it's use, and what do these perceptions link to trends in contemporary society and the role of religion in culture as a whole. This call also places importance on recognising distinct processes occurring within religious groups that influence their adoption and adaptation of the Internet to meet the group's specific needs or desires.

In light of this, this article seeks to investigate how Internet users conceive and speak of the Internet, in order to introduce it as suitable for religious use. This involves identifying the common discourses employed by religious users that conceptualize the Internet for acceptable use, and the narratives of use that emerge from these discourses. This process is defined as the 'spiritualising of the Internet', a framing process I have observed many groups of religious user undergo in order to explain why they engage in spiritual activities,

[1] See Dawson & Cowan 2004; Højsgaard & Warburg 2005.

form religious relationships or seek spiritual information online. Spiritualising the Internet means the Internet is seen as a technology or space that is suitable for religious engagement, whereby allowing users to include Internet-based activities into rhythm of their spiritual lives.

In many ways the process of users framing a technology in order to make it suitable for use Internet is not unique. New technologies have often been described and redesigned by users, in order for them to more easily be incorporated into the life practices of a group or community. The study of the social shaping of technology (SST) is a research area — linked to fields such as science and technology studies, sociology of technology, and media studies — that examines technological change and user innovation as a social process.

In order to understand how religious users shape and negotiate the Internet for their purposes, or what will be referred to as the religious shaping of technology, this process is best describe through its relationship to the SST approach. SST offers insight into how distinct communities or groups of technology users have been studied. It also sets the stage for considering how religious users shape technology towards their goals and desire. This provides insight into why Internet technology might be interpreted through a social-religious shaping of technology paradigm. This discussion leads to outlining what is being called the 'spiritualising of Internet' framing process. Here four common discourses used by religious Internet users to conceive of and describe Internet, along with four corresponding narratives of religious Internet use are introduced. These discourses and narratives of use have been identified through seven years of observation and qualitative study of various expressions of religion found online. In this work special attention has been given to why and how different religious groups use the Internet. Though this research has predominately been in case studies of religious use of the Internet within the Christian tradition these discourses and narratives have resonance with Internet use within other religious traditions. The discourse strategies and corresponding narratives provide a range of religious responses to the Internet, and may provide a template for studying the framing process of religious groups in general.

How Users Shape Technology

The claim, that religious users frame Internet technology in distinct ways, needs to be situated within a larger area of academic discourse. In the past two decades numerous

studies about technological user groups have emerged within an area of study referred to as the social shaping of technology (SST). This approach challenges technologically deterministic paradigms, which often assume technology is an all-powerful force and has its own internal technical logic. Instead SST views technology as a product of the interplay between technical and social factors in both design and use.[2] Technology is seen as a social process, this means it is possible for different social groups of users to shape technologies towards their own ends by the ways they use or modify a given technology. Different social groups may employ a given technology in unique ways, in order that their use maintains or reinforces certain patterns of group life.

A variety of approaches have been used to study the social use and socialisation of technology within public and private spaces. Each studies different choices available or roles at various stage of the innovation and design process from a user-oriented perspective.[3] These include looking at issues of gender and technology (sexual divisions of labour and use), domestication (use in everyday life), configuring of the user (role of user in design), constructivist technology assessment (anticipating social effects and needs of users to provide feedback into the design stage) and social informatics (uses and consequences of IT within institution and cultural contexts). Each focus allows researchers to explore in detail certain aspects of user choices and technological negotiation. One interesting example, which has relevance to how religious user groups may negotiate a new technology, is the domestication approach

In domestication the central concern is considering how technology has been adopted into the social sphere. Technology is seen as becoming en-cultured or embedded in every day life, especially the life of the home, in order to function. Roger Silverstone, Eric Hirsch and David Morley pioneered the "domestication" of technologies approach arguing technologies are conditioned and tamed by users in ways that enable them to fit more neatly into the routines of daily life or "the moral economy of the household".[4] Households are not homogeneous; they involve a complex social dynamic of different genders, generations and classes resulting in negotiated "moral economy". Moral economies are spaces where symbolic meaning transactions occur. Domesticating a technology or artefact means making choices about the meaning and practice of a technology within this sphere. Thus a technology is cultured by the culture in which it lives and by the agents who utilise it.

[2] See MacKenzie & Wajcman 1985.

[3] See Williams & Edge 1996, 856-899.

[4] See Silverstone & Hirsch & Morley 1992, 15-31.

Domestification shows how one may interpret the values of a closed community in relation to their choice concerning technology and how/why they incorporate it into their daily lives. This is of special relevance to religious shaping of technology especially in relation to groups that have tight boundaries, and where community values play an important role in the negotiation process. An example of applying the domestication approach to study of technology in a religious community is the work of Diane Zimmerman-Umble on Amish use and relationship to the telephone.[5] She re-frames the Amish's perceived rejection of technology by arguing that it is not that the Amish community sees technology as evil, rather they choose as a community to resist certain patterns of life they see as being reinforced through the use of certain technologies. Instead of rejecting all use of the telephone, the Amish choose to resist how use may interfere with valued patterns of family life by privatising communication. The telephone is domesticated by becoming a communal rather than an individual resource, phones being shared by a number of families and located in a central location, such as a phone being placed in a shed at the intersection of several farms. In this way they reconstruct technology by situating it in the community, thus allowing use while still affirming their values about maintaining distance from secular society. The domestication approach highlights how a particular group can tame a technology to fit into a particular social or even religiously cultured space.

SST highlights that technology is embedded in a social process of negotiation between individuals or groups who inevitably shape them towards their own desire and values. Domestication of technology provide helpful starting point accentuating how user's motivations and choices influence the use of technology. The SST tradition thus provides a starting point and tools for exploring issues of how users interact and shape technology. This also provides insight into how one might begin to contextualise religious users shaping of technology.

While an example of how domestication has been applied to the study of a religious group's use of technologies, this is a notable exception within SST studies. Overall limited work has been done considering how religion shapes technology, let alone considering how religious use frames the Internet. Therefore, an examination of how technology and religious users are being studied outside SST must be considered in order to move closer to understanding the religious shaping of technology.

[5] See Zimmerman-Umble 1992, 183-194.

The Religious Shaping of Technology

Religion is an area that has been often overlooked in many technology studies. Yet religion still plays a key role in the social construction of cultural spaces. Religion here refers to organised systems of spiritual beliefs. What I am most concerned with in this paper is how traditional religious groups are influenced by new media technology and how they negotiate technological interaction with their religious beliefs. It is important to recognize that religious groups still have significant influence within different cultures and social settings, and can effect the adoption, rejection or adaptation of a technology within that space. Therefore special consideration should be given to how religious users shape technologies towards their own ends to meet specific needs or desires.

I argue that the choices of religious users about technology, especially those within traditional religions (such as Islam, Christianity, Judaism), are negotiated through different ways than those within other social groups. This is because choices within religious groups are guided not just by needs and desires, but occur within the framework of a distinct worldview laden with spiritual meanings and values. This structure guides how they interpret the world. Traditional religious groups often see the world as composed of that which is sacred and that which is profane or secular. Their desire is to engage and interact with the sacred and shun, or at least distance themselves from the secular. For many conservative religious groups religious practice and lifestyle become shaped by rejection of modernity, which is seen as being secular.

Technology becomes a problematic area, as it is often equated with modernity. If technology is not rejected outright for this reason, it must undergo negotiation within the community so it can become acceptable for use or shaped in ways that allow it to be included within the sacred part of life. This process of this negotiation depends on the traditions and narratives of the religious community. It can include conducting certain rituals to 'sanctify' or set-apart the technology for religious use, or issuing official statements that present the technology in acceptable ways to the group. For groups that in general see technology use as less problematic or compatible with a religious lifestyle this negotiation may simply be members modelling appropriate use within the community and leaders praising certain forms of practice while discouraging other uses.

Two recent studies of Internet use within conservative Jewish religious communities demonstrate more explicitly how religious groups negotiate technology in order to make its

use acceptable within the practices and beliefs of the religious community. They highlight specifically, the role of language and advocating particular uses of the technology in this process of legitimisation. Together they highlight important factors in studying the religious shaping of technology.

The religious shaping of technology involves a strong linguistic framing element, as illustrated by Oren Livio and Keren Tenenboim's study of the discursive processes of women Internet users within the Ultra-Orthodox community in Israel.[6] The Ultra-Orthodox is a small conservative religious community in Israel, about 6 percent of the total population of seven million. They are characterised by their rejection of the values of modernity, following a strict rule of life and wearing the dress of their ancestors of 18th century Europe. Technology is often seen as a symbol of modernity and secular values, which they consciously distance themselves from. Thus use of technology is a point of great debate and law making within the community. Discussions about technology use are often framed in terms of possibilities and dangers, from discussing the boundaries of how electrical appliances might be used on Shabbat (Jewish sacred day of the week) to forbidding televisions in homes as the epitome of secular values and entertainment.

Livio and Tenenboim found women who used the Internet for work-related tasks[7] identified four discursive strategies employed for legitimising use. These included framing the Internet in binary opposition in order to distinguish the technology from the content, separating personal and societal effects, drawing on acceptable justifications such as statements of religious officials (i.e. approval from rabbi) or depoliticising use by denying subversive implication of the technology. An interesting claim made by several women in their study was that "the Internet will not change us". They justified this claim stating Internet use can be controlled (when it is used and what is done online) and made compatible with their form of life, so as not to challenge the beliefs of the community. Yet this was said while describing experiences of the Internet allowing them freedom of expression and empowerment unavailable to them in their community. In general, they found the women interviewed deliberately spoke of Internet technology in ways that framed it as compatible with community values (allowing them to work at home) and

[6] See Livio & Tenenboim 2004.

[7] It is important to note in Ultra-Orthodox homes the woman is typically the primary wage earner, as men must hold to a strict regime of religious study limiting their possibilities for work and income. Women are responsible for the home, child rearing and work to support the family. Thus work that can be done in the home is seen as desirable and encouraged by the community. For this reason some early bans on Internet use by different rabbis and communities have been negotiated in order to allow women to do work that requires them to use computers or the Internet.

affirmed communication patterns (requiring active participation by users and the forced filtering of content).

Discursive framing strategies served an important role within the community, both framing public use and satisfying cognitive dissonance within many members about the danger of this technology. Language became a powerful tool for making a technology that was considered secular, acceptable within certain boundaries.[8]

Religious shaping of technology also involves framing certain uses, as well as the technology itself. Gad Barzilai and Karine Barzilai-Nahon in their study of religious fundamentalism and the Internet examine Ultra-Orthodox Internet users of Hevre[9], an Israeli version of the *Classmates* web site[10] that helps friends from the past connect. They found that while rabbis initially condemned use of Internet, religious people wanted to use the Internet for economic purpose and self-expression.[11] In looking especially at the way religious women used technology, their study found the Internet became a "cultured technology". Female users shaped and conceived of the Internet in terms of needs. The Internet met particular needs within the community, enabling women to work at home. This led to a change in official views about the technology. Yet it also required the technology to be reshaped to fit within the boundaries and beliefs of the community's culture. Within the Ultra-Orthodox community this meant framing the Internet as a "textual communication tool" that can encourage for traditional forms of communication, such as *Responsa* online (a traditional form of Question & Answer – ask the rabbi), accessing sermons, news and facilitating religious argumentation. For Barzilai and Barzilai-Nahon "cultured technology" becomes a social discourse which recognizes that religious cultural spaces are affected by both complex social and distinct value-construction processes. "The Internet becomes a set of various cultured technologies with a variety of cultural contexts".[12] The extent to which a religious group can culture a technology, such as the Internet, indicates the extent to which it can be incorporate into the community and provide opportunities for group or self-expression within these boundaries.

Barzilai's and Barzilai-Nahon's idea of "cultured technology" proves helpful in moving towards a religious-SST approach. It recognizes that technology is shaped as it is domesticated to fit into users daily lives, and that use and design processes can be shaped

[8] See Livio & Teneboim 2004.

[9] See website of *Hevre*, from: http://www.hevre.co.il.

[10] See website of *Classmates* from: http://www.classmates.com.

[11] See Barzilai & Barzilai-Nahon 2005.

[12] Barzilai & Barzilai-Nahon 2005.

by the values of the community. A religious community's recognition of their ability to 'culture' the Internet allows them to more easily incorporate it into the life of the group. This points to the fact that adoption of a technology by a user group, especially a religious one, can enable them to construct or affirm certain cherished values. It recognizes that technology use reshapes public and private boundaries, as technology serves to perform a particular role within the community that can promote or sustain certain values.

Spiritualising the Internet

Studying the religious shaping of technology involves considering how a technology is framed through users employing certain discourse strategies and promoting certain uses of the technology. I refer to this combination of linguistic legitimisation and pro-active culturing by religious groups as the 'spiritualising of technology'. This involves speaking and conceiving of technology in ways that allows it to be used in religious activities and spiritual life practices. Spiritualising technology involves creating and maintaining certain rhetoric about the technology that presents it as a space suitable for religious use and engagement. If, for instance, the technology is described as "created by God" or "part of God's world" it can be seen as part of creation which humanity is called to steward. Thus engaging with technology becomes not only permissible, but also a mandate.

However, if a technology is described as "secular" engagement with it becomes unacceptable and boundaries are built to maintain distance from its polluting influence. Thus the language and images surrounding a given technology either invite or forbid engagement, as well as shape the types of interact that are viewed as acceptable by a religious user. When studying religious users of technology it is important to note that choices made regarding technology are not simply utilitarian, but are marked by spiritual motivations and religious language. They are laden with distinct symbolic interpretations about the purpose and power behind the technology. This is especially true of the Internet. Spiritualising the Internet involves making religious value judgements and presenting them in language, which is accessible and acceptable to the community. It involves endowing the Internet with a particular narrative of meaning, which contextualises the purpose of the Internet and how it could or should serve religious users. The next section will unpack four common discourse strategies that have surfaced in my research relates to use of the Internet by traditional religious groups.

Religious Discourses Strategies Framing the Internet

The Internet has been described as a tool, a space, state of mind[13] and a social network.[14] It also has been referred to as a public discourse[15] creating conversational communities as people try to explain and manage this new technology. Their community discourse creates boundaries of use and forms connections with other users. While the Internet presents new possibilities for work and communicative tasks, it is also used to re-connect people with the spiritual side of life. Yet in order to justify using the Internet for religious purposes, it often appears traditional religious groups and individuals employ particular rhetorical discourses or images of the Internet, describing it in ways that presents it as suitable for religious use or spiritual engagement. This process, as stated above, is being referred to as the spiritualising of the Internet. It involves the linguistic framing of the Internet that provides boundaries that can define its design and use.

Embedded in these discourses about the Internet are certain beliefs about the role and nature of the technology. They frame the Internet in a context that allows users to see it as sacred or part of the material world that can be used for religious pursuits. Spiritualising the Internet through certain discourses about Internet involves using religious language and images. They enable the Internet to be seen not simply as technologically constructed, but as a spiritual space or medium. The emergence of distinctly religious narratives about the Internet should not be surprising. This is an idea which I have explored in previous works, where I defined the Internet as a spiritual network or sacramental space and demonstrated how these have become growing and common conceptions about the Internet.[16]

Here, however, I wish to focus on several common religious discourses about Internet technology. They are employed to frame the Internet for religious use and are evidenced in current literature about religion online. Religious discourses about the Internet are used to define acceptable use and shape the types of religious rituals and practices that emerge online. These discourses also provide an apologetic for religious online engagement. In my observations and research of numerous online religious communities, and how traditional religious groups have employed the Internet for religious purpose, I have identified four common discourse strategies used to frame Internet technology. These include describing the Internet as: a spiritual medium facilitating religious experience, a sacramental space

[13] See Markham 1998.

[14] See Jones 1997, 7-32.

[15] See Agre 1998.

[16] See Campbell 2005; Campbell 2004c, 111-135.

suitable for religious use, a tool promoting religion or religious practice and a technology for affirming religious life. Each is outlined below in detail.

Spiritual Medium Facilitating Spiritual Experiences

The Internet as a spiritual medium is a discourse that presents the Internet as a technology possessing special qualities that facilitate spiritual experiences. Describing Internet as a spiritual medium interprets the technology as having within it the ability to alter individual and communal understanding of what it means to spiritual as certain practices and meanings are brought online. The spiritual, or spirituality, refers to the human search for "meaning significance".[17] Contained within this discourse is the idea that the technology itself is an extension of the spiritual world and engagement with it will facilitate spiritual encounters.

Jennifer Cobb in *Cybergrace* (1998) develops this discourse when she attempts to present a "theology of cyberspace". She argues the Internet facilitates a process or sacred journey leading us on a mystical path towards the Divine. By arguing, "the sacred is present in computers" she describes cyberspace as a place for society to find healing by reconnecting the spheres of science and religion. She highlights Teilhard de Chardin's idea of the Omega point "where all layers of the universe are centred" and the noosphere, the space where "the concentration of pure consciousness and absolute unity" abides.[18] Cobb suggests the Internet might be a manifestation of Chardin's ideas and claims this perspectives enable the exploration of the Internet as a spiritual network. Engaging in cyberspace becomes an aid to humanity's spiritual progression, as the Internet serves as an "important way station" on humanity's journey towards a greater spiritual evolution.[19] This is a prophetic discourse; going online will connect you with the spiritual. It argues that within the wires and connections of the Internet a conduit for the sacred is created, so religious use of the Internet is seen as a natural and expected part of engagement online.

[17] See Jones & Wainwright & Yarnold 1986, 50.

[18] See Cobb 1998, 97.

[19] See Cobb 1998, 97.

Sacramental Space Suitable for Religious Use

The discourse of the Internet as sacramental space describes the Internet as a place that can be set apart for 'holy use' enabling people to describe online activities as part of their religious life. It is different from the spiritual medium discourse that presents that Internet as infused or wired to be a spiritual space. Instead it sees the Internet is not by nature a sacred space, but it can become so through designing the technology in distinct ways or through performing rituals that transform it into a place where the spiritual can be encountered. Spirituality is not embedded in Internet technology; rather it is consciously created or constructed. This discourse is often employed by people using the Internet to create online sacred environments such as cyber-churches, cyber-temples or virtual shrines. They consciously design these web sites as online spaces that reflect traditional religious settings and icons to give users the impression they have entered a sacred space. Sacramental use can also include conducting set online rituals, searching out religious information or forming religious communities. It also involves constructing online platforms that will allow or support spiritual practices.

This discourse is used in the work of Margaret Wertheim in *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*. In it she argues cyberspace is a non-physical space allowing people to reconnect with ideas of the spiritual, immaterial world that have often been silenced by the dualistic cosmology of Western science. "The 'spiritual' appeal of cyberspace lies precisely in this paradox: It is a repackaging of the old idea of Heaven, but in a secular, technologically sanctioned format."[20] Just as the gothic cathedrals of Europe were constructed with a distinct architecture (such as in the shape of a cross) and symbolic meaning (attempting to create an other-worldly setting that referenced heaven) so the designers of online spaces can use the technology to create forms that link to images of the sacred. She argues cyberspace has within it the potential for the sacred, so the Internet can be used to create a "holy space" that is set apart for religious use. The sacramental space discourse frames the Internet as having the potential to be constructed and consecrated for religious uses such as religious services or rituals. It argues the Internet can create a sacred space so it can be used for religious purposes.

[20] Wertheim 1999, 21.

Tool to Promote Religion and Religious Practice

The Internet is also described as a tool that can promote a given religion or religious practice. This discourse emphasizes that the Internet is a technological tool, and that how it is used is dependent on the motives and desires of its users and designers. As a tool it is seen as a neutral artefact. Thus it can be used for religious pursuits, as easily as it is used for informational or work related activities. Attention is placed on motivations behind the use. The Internet can be used to seek religious information and spiritual relationships or it can be used to reconfigure traditional religious activities so they can be pursued online.[21]

This discourse describes the Internet as a tool for promoting religious practices, or in some cases, presents the image of the Internet as a new terrain for proselytising endeavours. Walter Wilson exemplifies this in *The Internet Church* where he claims that through the Internet Christians "have the opportunity to reach every man, woman and child on the face of the earth in the next decade", a phrase used three times in his book.[22] Wilson stresses the ubiquity of Internet technology, its ability to cross social and cultural borders and the non-threatening environment it creates which make it an ideal medium for users to engage in spiritual searching. "It provides a seeker with the ability to navigate his or her way to the foot of Calvary's cross",[23] he claims. This discourse emphasizes the Internet can serve as a tool both for users interested in pursuing content or activities related to religion and those religious users seeking to promote their beliefs to others through web sites, discussion forums or other 'e-vangelistic' activities. The Internet as a tool that can be used in conversion becomes interpreted as being part of a divine mandate, such as in the Christian tradition where believers are charged to "go into all the world and preach the gospel".[24] This discourse draws attention to particular tasks and activities that can be performed online in order to meet traditional religious goals, such as witnessing, preaching, prayer or confession. It argues the Internet can and should be used to promote different aspects of religion.

[21] See examples in Zaleski 1997.

[22] See Wilson 2000, 2, 120, 154.

[23] Wilson 2000, 25.

[24] The Great Commission, Matthew 28/18-20.

Technology for Affirming Religious Life

The Internet can also be framed as a technology that can be used to affirm particular beliefs or one's religious lifestyle. This discourse highlights how the Internet is a social technology, helping people of shared faith or convictions to gather together. Attention is given to how the Internet can connect those from the same religious tradition who would normally be separated by geography, time or other limitations. It provides a new image of the global community of the faithful. This discourse also highlights the Internet as a technology that affirms religious life which allows religious communities to emphasize particular religious activities that the Internet facilitates well. This includes encouraging access to religious materials that affirm beliefs, holding religious discussions or debates on issues important to a given community or exhorting members to continue in valued religious activities by providing related resources online. It is a discourse that contextualises the Internet as a technology to be used in life practice that affirms a specific religion or general spiritual ethos.

This discourse is used by Brenda Brasher in *Give Me that Online Religion* as she argues the Internet enables new forms of traditional religious expression, highlighting examples such as a cyber-seder or virtual Passover as a way of helping people reconnect with their Jewish faith. The Internet is a technology that possesses qualities of fluidity and autonomy that she feels can help people understand in new ways concepts of sacred time, religiosity and spiritual experience. Online presents new opportunities that should encourage people to explore religion and other forms of spirituality. Thus the Internet becomes "a crucial contemporary cultural outlet for our meaning heritage from the past" and can "make a unique contribution to global fellowship" and inter-religious understanding.[25] Seeing the Internet as a technology that promotes religion allows religious users to cultivate distinct forms of religious practice online. This discourse frames the Internet as a place where religion should be practised, and as a resource for religious people to connect with their faith and other faithful.

These four discourses present a range of explanations religious individual or groups may employ to frame the Internet. The Internet as a spiritual medium frames the Internet as a technology possessing, within the hardware and wires, an unseen realm where humanity can encounter the transcendent and spiritual experience. The Internet as a sacramental space discourse frames the Internet as space that can be shaped to allow people to engage in

[25] Brasher 2001, 6.

new or traditional religious rituals online. The Internet as tool for promoting religion frames the Internet as resource able to connect with religious people and activities that can lead them to spiritual transformation. Finally, the Internet as a technology affirming religious life frames the Internet as a resource for building a communal or individual connection with a particular religious tradition or form of life.

Spiritualising the Internet involves accepting and employing a distinct discourse about the nature of the Internet and its relationship to religion or the spiritual in order to justify or promote certain religious uses online. Looking at how the Internet can be cultured in religious language and images also reveals user's distinct views about the nature of the technology. While other discourses could likely be identified these four provide a spectrum of some of the most common evidenced in religious use online. This leads to a discussion of four corresponding narratives of Internet use fostered by these particular discourses. Narratives of religious Internet use provide models for considering how beliefs about Internet technology influence and shape religious use online.

Narratives of Religious Use of the Internet

Within the discourses discussed, distinct ideas emerge about how the Internet should be used and why this use is important. These discourses presented above provide a framework to explain WHY Internet can be used in religious activities. Yet they do not fully explain HOW the Internet is shaped and employed by religious users. Therefore it is important to connect these discourses to narratives of use, showing how the framing of the Internet creates opportunities for religious groups to use the technology in order to fulfil certain goals or support the beliefs of their religious culture.

The Internet as a spiritual medium creates a narrative of the Internet functioning as a 'spiritual network'. The Internet as a sacramental space supports a narrative of the Internet serving as a 'worship space'. The Internet as tool for promoting religion links to the narrative of the Internet as 'missionary tool'. The Internet as a technology for affirming religious life connects to a narrative of the Internet supporting 'religious identity'. These are explained more fully below.

Spiritual Network

The Internet as a spiritual medium discourse describes the Internet as a connection point for users to plug into in their search for spiritual experience. This may take place in a solitary or communal setting. As a medium the Internet can be seen to facilitate spiritual or transcendent encounters, with the God, the divine or other spiritual seekers. This links to a narrative of use of the Internet being a 'spiritual network'. This narrative is often used to stress that the Internet has been designed by God for a specific religious purpose or infused with the divine with the potential to facilitate spiritual encounters. Here the Internet is used to search out one's personal spiritual destiny that can be interpreted through a narrative of shared experience. It highlights the desire for freedom and spiritual experience that can be shared with others.

This narrative is clearly seen in one particular case study of a Charismatic email community, the Community of Prophecy, structured as an online school around Christian prophecy.[26] It described itself as a "safe-place" to learn how to practice the New Testament gift of prophecy. Members of their community describe the Internet as a spiritual network where "God is weaving connection and creating relationships between people all over the world" for prayer and support. Members felt connections within the online community would lead to opportunities for members to become involved in others' "real world" lives and ministries. They also stressed connections were designed and initiated by God and were internationally diverse, forming an overlapping network of online and offline communities. Members characterised themselves as "pioneers" on a divine mission and the community having potential to influence the offline world as well as the online setting in this quest. Members were also characterised as involved in "warfare" against an enemy seeking to sabotage the community potential and destiny through computer problems. The spiritual network narrative empowered members to understand their community as possessing power from God to influence the global Christian community. As a spiritual network the Internet is seen as a space where the Divine resides and can be experienced.

[26] See Campbell 2005; Campbell 2003a, 179-199.

Worship Space

Another narrative of religious Internet use is as a worship space. This narrative argues the Internet is a sacramental space, a space or forum that can be shaped for conducting traditional or new religious rituals. This can begin with a ritual or act of consecration that is seen to prepare the Internet as a space to conduct a specific religious service or practice. Buddhists, according to Jeff Zaleski[27] were the first members of a major world religion to both consecrate the Internet as a sacramental space and to duplicate online and in full a traditional form of religious practice. In 1996 Tibetan monks based in New York performed a special ceremony and ritual to bless cyberspace for use in Buddhist religious practices. Since that time practices such as Dharma Combat, a form of unrehearsed dialogue which tests Zen practitioners in their understanding of Zen truth, has taken place online. Other religious groups have also conducted rituals to consecrate cyberspace as holy space including Catholics and technopagans, a new religion of neo-pagans who perform their rituals online.[28]

As a worship space the Internet becomes a place for worship. Many religious groups are consciously designing online worship spaces that attempt to re-create traditional religious worship experiences in a digital environment. A common example in the Christian tradition is the cyberchurch, which have been referred to as churches without walls. Examples include the often-cited *First Church of Cyberspace*[29] or newer experiments such as the *Church of Fools*.[30] The *Church of Fools* was designed as the UK's first web-based 3D church. During this 3-month experiment in 2004 the online congregation was able to attend weekly services in the church's multi-user environment, enabling participation through computer avatars that could join in hymn singing and communicate synchronously with others logged on. Besides the weekly gatherings, the church encouraged online parishioners to drop in and visit the sanctuary or crypt and interact with others. Within its first 24-hours online the church had 41,000 visitors and raised much discussion in the international press about the implication of online church for organised religion.

Online worship spaces can also lead to adapting or modifying religious acts in unique ways. Christian groups have used the Internet to facilitate online prayer meeting. Using

[27] See Zaleski 1997, 164.

[28] The technopagan movement embraces techno-witches, techno-druids, technoshamans and ravers. It should be noted, that not all pagans are technopagans. For an example of their online rituals see technopagan blessing at http://www.scaredsacred.org/.

[29] See *First Church of Cyberspace*, from: http://www.godweb.com.

[30] See *Church of Fools*, from: http://www.shipoffools.com/church/.

IRC or chat rooms, individuals gathered for online meetings on various channels designated as religious meeting places and exchange typed prayers with others. Extensive observation of these groups illustrates their innovation in symbolic language used to communicate spiritual content. In a charismatic prayer meeting religious emoticons were frequently used, typed random key strokes such as "josrhsaoinvlkdnruojiaurfa" were used to represent glossalia and \o/ used to signify the lifting up of hands to "praise the Lord".[31] A study of prayer meetings in a multi-user virtual reality environment found "a prayer meeting in the virtual world may not provide the same type of religious experience as a conventional church service, but it certainly reproduces some of the essential features of the latter - albeit in novel way".[32] The Internet as a worship space narrative encourages the use of the Internet as a space for conducting religious activities and ritual online.

Missionary Tool

Seeing the Internet as a tool for promoting religion and religious practice allows it to easily become a missionary tool. The Internet becomes a dynamic resource for encouraging certain practices among religious followers or seeking to convert spiritual seekers to a particular religious belief or tradition. A growing use of the Internet is online proselytising, often referred to as "e-vangelism". Various books and online resources have been created to provide guidance in this activity.[33] Online witnessing focuses on presenting a purposeful religious presence in cyberspace through a variety of means, through web sites, in chat rooms and on email lists. While in some cases this is being promoted in a top-down manner, with religious organisations encouraging these activities and providing resources, in many instances these are individual Internet-savvy religious practitioners undertaking these tasks.

A unique example of using the Internet as a missionary tool was the *Online Missionaries Project*. This was a collaborative partnership of three youth-oriented Christian organisations based in the UK in 2002 who sought to develop innovative Internet resources that could be used in missionary activities by Christian groups. The project team consciously described the Internet as a catalyst and tool for mission to non-Christians. Their projects aim was to establish networks of relationships they hoped would create "new

[31] See Campbell 2005.

[32] Schroeder & Noel & Lee 1998.

[33] See Dixon 1999.

shapes of church" by linking "un-churched" clubbers and Christians, both online and offline.[34] A focal point of the project was the Clubbers Temple web site designed as a "virtual club" using animated Flash software, sound and experiential elements including a chat room and a prayer wall. Clubbers Temple was built as a connection hub, where spiritual seekers could meet with Christians in the "virtual bar" chat room to find information about Christianity or visit the dance club that was designed to facilitate an "experience with God". The web site was to serve as a discipleship resource for groups of young people doing face-to-face evangelism on the Spanish island of Ibiza. One team member described it as, "A tool to keep in touch with new friends we have met here in Ibiza and an accessible way for clubbers to find out about God and us".[35] Promoting the site in Ibiza provided a way to initiate "spiritual conversations" or offer prayer to clubbers. Describing the Internet as a tool for mission provided focus to the team members at all stages of the project, from the designers to those serving in the chat room. The Internet as a missionary tool encourages religious users to incorporate the Internet into their proselytising strategies.

Religious Identity

The discourse that describes the Internet as a technology that can affirm religious lifestyle, empowers users to see the Internet as a place to also affirm their religious identity. A common motivation for religious Internet use often is to connect with members of a particular religious background, tradition or theology. Here the Internet serves to affirm or build communal identity and cohesion. Having a shared religious identity means individuals subscribe to common beliefs based on a specific religious tradition lived out through public rituals. Identity comes from reinforcing a particular set of convictions or values that are transported online. Through forming a network of religious identity, users affirm these beliefs through their discussions and common practices. The Internet is also seen as a place that enables individuals to connect with a larger community of shared faith online. Members encourage one another in their shared convictions and support this unifying narrative through supportive discussion on their choice of religious identification. This idea of religious identity is explored in the work of Mia Lövheim where she considers

[34] See Campbell 2004a, 208-231.
[35] Campbell 2004a, 110.

how religious identity is constructed through discourse with youth discussion boards in Sweden.[36] She argues the Internet can play an interesting and important role in youth's process of identity formation, especially related to religious identity. She employs Nancy Ammerman's idea of "autobiographical narratives"[37] to uncover the stories that individuals weave and used to describe their particular form of life.

An example of this is the I-church, launched in 2004 as the first official "virtual parish" of the Anglican Church.[38] At its embodied dedication in Oxford (July 2004), the Bishop of Dorchester pronounced an official blessing over the cyber-vicar physically present and online congregation present via a web cam: "May it be through I-church, Lord Christ, that many are made one with your and with one another." The 700 members who joined before the official launch agree to live by a modified version of St Benedict's rule of prayer, study and social action. There is a strong sense while though by official sources the online parish is seen as experimental and evolving the project is firmly grounded in the Anglican tradition. Its attachment to St Benedictine is also an attempt to provide a traditional grounding, as the rule emerged as a response to the wandering monks of the Celtic church in Europe. Benedict encouraged stability and attachment and close proximity to one community. This physical connectivity of the monastery is being exchanged within I-church for a more fluid "connectivity through the community of love" and affiliation with the global Anglican Communion. The I-church experiment has raised debates within the Anglican Church on the possible redefinition of the idea of being a sacramental community, a key marker of the Anglican tradition. While what role of sacramental ritual like the Eucharist will play in the I-church are yet to be determined, the attempts to make the community's grounded in traditional forms of expression such as liturgical prayers are meant to affirm the religious identity the community hopes to maintain.

Using the Internet to reinforce or maintain religious identity in the Anglican tradition can also be seen in the online discussion group the Anglican Communion Online.[39] This email community identified itself as a microcosm of the larger Anglican Communion in its list web site. A study of this group showed that while members often join the community to gain understanding of the Anglican Church, they stay because of the relationships they form with others who share their allegiance to Anglicanism. The religious identity narrative demonstrates that individuals can see their online involvement as an opportunity to be

[36] See Linderman & Lövheim 2003; Lövheim 2004, 59-73.

[37] See Ammerman 2003.

[38] See website of I-church, from: http://i-church.org.

[39] Campbell 2005.

interconnected with others from a similar religious tradition. Affirming one's religious lifestyle often means surrounding oneself with like-minded people. The Internet becomes an important resource for many people who see to do this.

These four narratives confirm how religious discourses about the Internet can encourage certain forms of Internet use. The 'spiritual network' narrative describes using the Internet as a spiritual medium to connect with God and a divine destiny. Internet use becomes simply one expression of one's pursuit of a spiritual life or experience. The 'worship space' narrative presents the Internet as a sacramental space that encourages actively designing the online environment in ways so it host religious rituals and facilitate certain expressions of worship or religiosity. The 'mission tool' narrative shows how the Internet can be used to promote religious beliefs to those outside its membership. The 'religious identity' narrative illustrates the Internet can be used as a technology to affirm a particular religious identity or form of life. These narratives connect how religious users speak and use the Internet in ways that allow it to become part of their religious life and community.

Summary: The Religious Shaping of the Internet

This paper has sought to address the need for more theoretical work on religion and the Internet that can interpret and contextualise the common forms of practice occurring online. Considering this process of 'spiritualising the Internet' may offer insight into how religious groups negotiate with postmodernity, by highlighting some of the ways they describe and culture the tools of modernity. Spiritualising the Internet is a process that frames the Internet as an acceptable technology through employing a discourse laden with religious language and meaning. This creates narratives guiding how the Internet can and should be used within the context of a given religious community or beliefs. The fact that the Internet can be cultured to fit within religious practice or overarching beliefs of a given religious tradition affirms users in their desire engage the Internet for religious ends. Technology can be domesticated for not only social, but also religious purposes. Religious users can shape the Internet in line with their values through their descriptive language about the Internet, design technology towards certain religious goals or highlighting particular uses of the Internet that are in line with their life habits. This ability to culture or spiritualise the Internet allows it to be incorporated within the religious self-expression of particular group or individual's life. This investigation of the religious shaping of the Internet provides a

helpful platform to begin to draw conclusions about the relationship of religious Internet users to the emerging digital culture and the role of religion in an information society.

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